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ABSTRACT

Cultural pressure for thinness has been cited as a contributing factor in the apparent increase in the eating disorders of anorexia and bulimia. Previous research has examined popular periodicals as an indicator of cultural pressure for thinness. This study assessed changes over the past 20 years in numbers of popular magazine articles focusing on weight loss through dieting. Three independent raters were trained on criteria used to code titles of articles related to dieting for weight loss. Only those titles indexed in the "Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature" under "diet" which specifically endorsed weight loss were coded. The results revealed a significant increase in the number of weight-loss oriented diet articles over the past 20 years, ranging from a low of 5 in 1966 to a high of 56 in 1986. A total of 538 articles over the 20-year span were coded as clearly advocating weight loss. Of these, 380 were in women's magazines, 155 were in general interest magazines, and only 3 were in men's magazines. These results reflect an increase in diet articles advocating weight loss, with more emphasis on weight reduction for women than for men. These findings are consistent with both the increased incidence and the gender differences in eating disorders. (NB)

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Weight Loss Emphasis in Popular Magazines: A Twenty Year Analysis

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In recent years, the incidence of diagnosed cases of anorexia and bulimia nervosa have increased dramatically. One variable which has frequently been cited as a contributing factor in this apparent increase in eating disorders is cultural pressure for thinness. Because approximately 90% to 95% of those diagnosed as anorexic or bulimic are female, it is important to compare social influences for males and females.

Several previous studies have examined popular periodicals as an indicator of cultural pressure for thinness. A study which surveyed six women's magazines between the years of 1960 and 1978 found a significant increase in the number of diet articles (Garner, Garfinkel, Schwartz, & Thompson, 1980). This demonstrates the increasing emphasis on weight loss reflected in the media for women, but permits no comparisons to be made between men and women. A more recent study compared four women's magazines with four men's magazines published during the 1980 year, and found that the women's magazines contained many more ads and articles about diet foods, body shape, and foods in general than did the men's magazines (Silverstein, Perdue, Peterson, & Kelly, 1986).

The purpose of the present study is to assess changes over the past twenty years in numbers of popular magazine articles focusing on weight loss through dieting. Magazines will be categorized according to whether they target primarily men, women, or a "general readership" (eg., Time magazine) audience. The Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature was used as the source of articles, as it indexes a broad spectrum of popular magazines.

Three independent raters were trained on criteria used to code titles of articles related to dieting for weight loss. Only those titles indexed in the Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature under "diet" which specifically endorsed weight loss were coded. All ambiguous titles (eg. "A Fantastic New Diet For You") or titles implying dietary management for health rather than weight loss (eg. "The Diet Plan For a Healthier You") were excluded. Interrater reliability was established at 90.9%.

The results are illustrated in Figure 1. There has been a significant increase in the number of weight-loss oriented diet articles over the past twenty years, ranging from a low of 5 in 1966 to a high of 56 in 1986. The last decade represents a dramatic increase over the previous decade, with the mean number of diet articles increasing from 12.5 in the 1966-76 time span to 40 in the 1977-86 period. It is interesting to note that every year in the second decade yielded a higher number of weight-loss articles than any year in the first decade, with the exception of 1978, which had one less article than 1975, the year in the first decade with the highest number of articles. A total of 538 articles over the 20-year span were coded as clearly advocating weight loss. Of these, 380 (70.6%) were in women's magazines, 155 (28.8%) were in general interest magazines, and only 3 (.5%) were in men's magazines.

The results reflect an increase in diet articles advocating weight loss, with more emphasis on weight reduction for women than for men. These findings are consistent with both the increased incidence and the gender differences in eating disorders.

References

Garner, D.M., Garfinkel, P.E., Schwartz, D., & Thompson, M. (1980). Cultural expectations of thinness in women. Psychological Reports, 47, 483-491.

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Figure 1

Weight-loss diet articles indexed in Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature over 20 years